
Giving Every Child a Place to Play Ball

A PARTNERSHIP TO REVITALIZE SAN FRANCISCO'S ATHLETIC FIELDS

A Case Study for City Fields Foundation, 2010
by Anne Schonfield



Executive Summary

This is the story of how philanthropists and city leaders—including three brothers who grew up, played sports and raised their children in San Francisco—teamed up to revitalize the city’s athletic playfields so more kids can get out and play.

In 2005, Bob, Bill and John Fisher established the City Fields Foundation to help San Francisco upgrade its run-down athletic fields and provide more play spaces for the city’s 800,000 children and adults. In just six years, the Playfields Initiative, a public-private partnership between City Fields and San Francisco’s Recreation and Parks Department, has renovated 12 athletic fields in six parks with synthetic turf and night lights and reorganized the city’s antiquated field permit system, with significant impact for city residents.

These efforts have added more than 66,000 hours of annual playtime to San Francisco’s parks and put the city on track to eliminate the ongoing deficit of athletic fields for local kids. At the six-year point of the Playfields Initiative, this report examines City Fields’ accomplishments, challenges and lessons learned.

THE NEED

San Francisco’s parks and athletic fields are heavily used by children and adults—a 2004 assessment concluded that the city needed 30 additional baseball and 35 additional soccer fields to meet demand. To reduce this field deficit and to make sure that every San Francisco child has a place to enjoy athletics, City Fields and San Francisco joined forces to revitalize the city’s sports fields and transform the reservation system. The \$45 million initiative

was funded with \$20 million in public funds from San Francisco and \$25 million from private donors.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND OUTCOMES

- Starting with a pilot project on two fields and expanding to six fields total at this point, **City Fields increased play time for kids and adults**, by replacing grass fields—that were often closed for rain, re-growth and maintenance—with state of the art synthetic turf, as well as night lighting, restrooms, seating, and other amenities. The new turf fields are now requested approximately four times more often than grass fields and the renovated fields have become “destination facilities” that bring a greater diversity of users and more safety to city parks.
- Transformed San Francisco’s fields permit system:** The new on-line reservation system ensures more equitable and easier field access for San Francisco residents through more efficient field allocation and the ability to place more teams and players on each field. Along with the field renovations, these permit changes have enabled more play for youth teams, schools and athletes and greatly reduced the athletic field deficit.
- As one of the largest private donations ever to San Francisco’s Recreation and Parks Department, this project **shows that public-private partnerships can work**. A key piece of the success is the candid working relationship between the Foundation and the city that



Playing ball at South Sunset field opening day

These efforts have added more than 66,000 hours of annual playtime to San Francisco’s parks and put the city on track to eliminate the ongoing deficit of athletic fields for local kids.

focuses on the countless details it takes to upgrade the fields. The partnership has strong political support from Mayor Gavin Newsom and others, built on a carefully-crafted community input process. Through leadership and financial support, the Playfields Initiative was able to spotlight and is on track to solve a “hidden” issue that was important to San Francisco families.

CHALLENGES

Despite these accomplishments, the partnership has faced several challenges, including critics concerned about the safety and environmental impact of synthetic turf, community objections and lengthy delays to a proposed renovation in Golden Gate Park, a highly politicized public input

process, uncertain support at the Board of Supervisors, and frequent leadership transitions in the Recreation and Parks Department.

IMPACT

In just six years, the Playfields Initiative has produced significant results with tangible benefits for city residents. By renovating 12 athletic fields in six parks and reorganizing the permit system, the partnership has *directly benefited thousands of San Francisco’s children and adults by greatly increasing playtime on city athletic fields*. The initiative shows what committed donors, staff and city agencies can accomplish when they work together with resolve, good planning, effective communication and a dedication to “stick with it” through the challenges.

How It Happened

How did philanthropists and civic leaders—led by three brothers who grew up, played sports and raised their children in San Francisco—help transform the city’s athletic fields and give thousands of kids more play time in city parks? This report describes how this family, working with dedicated staff and city government officials, revitalized San Francisco’s sports fields into highly popular, state-of-the-art athletic facilities with enough capacity to accommodate all of San Francisco’s youth athletics.

Bob, Bill and John Fisher started the City Fields Foundation in 2005 to increase the availability and improve the condition of playfields for San Francisco kids. At the six-year point of this initiative, this report considers the efforts so far and critically examines the Foundation’s accomplishments, challenges and lessons learned. This report is based on City Fields and City of San Francisco documents, news articles and interviews with numerous stakeholders, including Foundation staff and donors, San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department staff, community members, field users and others. (See Appendix B for stakeholders interviewed).

PROBLEMS IN SAN FRANCISCO PARKS

As a relatively dense city, San Francisco’s 800,000 residents rely on their city parks for recreation, outdoor space, sports and other activities. The city’s athletic fields are heavily used by youth and adult athletic leagues, local schools, summer and

after-school programs, and others—with up to 4,000 kids playing sports on public fields each weekday after school.

To understand park use, in 2004 San Francisco commissioned an independent assessment of the recreation needs of city residents. The assessment showed that many park users felt the city’s recreation facilities were deteriorating and unsafe, and the city’s inventory of playfields¹ was much lower than national guidelines. Considering permit requests and population density, *the assessment recommended adding 30 baseball fields and 35 multi-use/soccer fields to simply meet demand.*

The city was experiencing other problems with their athletic fields beyond just a lack of supply. These included poor field conditions—with gopher holes and dirt instead of grass—at many existing fields, frequent field closure for rain, poor maintenance, and a poorly organized, “old boys network” to reserve fields and obtain permits that favored people who knew city staff. This was extremely frustrating for youth athletic leagues (especially those serving girls), which were often told not to recruit more children because the city didn’t have enough fields. In short, San Francisco did not have enough sports fields for kids and the system was a mess for many field users.

FISHER FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

In 2005, Bob, Bill and John Fisher—sons of The Gap retail store founders Doris and Don Fisher—decided they wanted to address these problems and help city youth by

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It (Garfield Square Park) was unusable. It was gross. Before they fixed this place up, there was trash, there was graffiti, there were people doing drugs.

”

**Gail Meadows, Principal
of elementary school near
Garfield Square Park**

¹ Fields used for soccer, football, baseball, softball, lacrosse and other organized sports. City Fields has renovated athletic fields and supporting facilities (bleachers, walkways, some restrooms), but did not upgrade other facilities in the parks where fields are located (such as playgrounds and grassy areas).

MISSION

The City Fields Foundation seeks to address the shortage of athletic fields in San Francisco and help the City equitably provide sports facilities for youth and adult leagues, school teams, physical education classes and informal, neighborhood play.

providing more athletic spaces for soccer and other sports. They wanted to help make San Francisco a more livable place for families and children and thought the poor field conditions sent the wrong message to city families. They also saw the problems with city parks as emblematic of other “quality of life” issues that pushed families to leave San Francisco. So they decided to take action.

The Fisher brothers also wanted to work together on a charitable project outside of each of their own areas of expertise and bring their private sector experience to assist their home town. So they approached Susan Hirsch of Hirsch and Associates LLC, a philanthropic advising firm, to discuss strategies for effective philanthropy in San Francisco and advise them on how to proceed.

After visiting multiple parks, speaking with members of the community and discussing their own experiences as parents whose kids played sports in San Francisco, the solution became clear. They concluded that the best way to increase the amount of youth play on city ball fields was to renovate existing fields with the new generation of synthetic turf (which allows more playtime and requires less water and maintenance than grass) and help update the field reservation system — two long-time goals of San Francisco’s Recreation and Parks Department.²

CITY FIELDS WAS BORN

As a result, the Fishers started the City Fields Foundation in 2005 to reduce the on-going shortage of sports fields in San Francisco and provide more athletic opportunities for local children and families. With the help of several dozen other donors, they built the Foundation on the

premise that youth — especially kids in a large city — need access to safe, clean and high-quality outdoor places to play.

Through the Playfields Initiative, the Foundation has renovated 12 athletic fields in six parks since 2005 and collaborated with the city to improve the field reservation system. The initiative is a \$45 million program, with \$20 million in public funds from San Francisco³ and \$25 million in private funding, including donations from over 70 individuals, organizations and family foundations. (See City Fields’ donors at www.cityfieldsfoundation.org/thank-you)

City Fields has a three-person Board of Trustees (Bob, Bill and John Fisher), two full time staff (Patrick Hannan and Shelley Gabriel), a director (Susan Hirsch) and several consultants. As detailed below, the Foundation’s staff worked closely with San Francisco’s Recreation and Parks Department on all levels of this initiative—from regular consultations with field architects and construction teams, to product discussions with turf manufacturers, and numerous community meetings to gather neighborhood input and answer questions. Since each field is different, with different use patterns, different configurations and distinct neighborhood dynamics, no detail was too small for City Fields and city staff to get the renovations right.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP⁴

A key piece of this initiative is the committed—but at times difficult—relationship between City Fields and the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department. There are several aspects to this partnership.

The \$25 million committed by City Fields makes this one of the largest private donations ever to the Department. But equally

² The Department is responsible for the over 220 city parks, playgrounds and open spaces, including Golden Gate Park, Coit Tower, Palace of Fine Arts, and Candlestick Park.

³ Public funding includes \$8.5 million from the Clean and Safe Neighborhoods Parks Bond approved by San Francisco voters in 2008.

⁴ Public-private partnerships involve collaboration between the public and private sectors to deliver a project or service traditionally provided by the public sector.

important is the day-to-day working relationship between City Fields, the city government and the community to select, design, and renovate the fields. From the start, the motive was to invest in and build a strong partnership with the city—not just making a donation and walking away, but working closely with city leaders and staff to upgrade the fields. Through this leadership and financial support, the Playfields Initiative was able to take a “hidden” issue that was important to families in San Francisco, bring attention to it and put the city in a position to ultimately resolve it.

To that end, City Fields signed a detailed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Recreation and Parks Department in February 2006, spelling out the terms of the partnership. This included identifying each party’s role in field selection, construction, turf installation, and other activities. City Fields staff and trustees believe that this “MOU with teeth” was crucial to the success of the project, since it clearly laid out each party’s responsibilities—including San Francisco and City Fields staff, union workers and others—and ensured clear roles before the Foundation committed significant funds to the city. For example, one condition was that improving and upgrading the field reservation system must be completed within one year. The MOU was key to City Field donor support since it showed that the city would commit to working in an efficient and budget-conscious manner.

Since the San Francisco Board of Supervisors—the equivalent of a city council—had to approve this MOU, the public-private partnership received significant attention and ultimately strong City Hall support. San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom has been a strong advocate throughout the project, announcing the partnership at a ceremony in Garfield Square Park in 2006 and praising its achievements in his 2010 State of the City address. As Newsom explained, “Our fields campaign is working. If you go to Silver Terrace... Garfield, Crocker-Amazon... Franklin Park or South Sunset, you’ll see the benefits of the private

sector joining the public... not just the play fields themselves, but the infrastructure and lighting around it. This is happening in our city. This is extraordinary.”

FIELD RENOVATIONS AND PERMIT CHANGES

With this partnership and MOU in place, City Fields and the Recreation and Parks Department began renovating athletic fields in 2006, revitalizing 12 fields in six parks by 2010. (For locations of each field, see Appendix A). The renovations began with two fields (Garfield Square and Silver Terrace parks) in 2006, and grew to four additional fields through top-level support from the Mayor and the Recreation and Parks Department, and a thorough stakeholder process, including City Hall hearings, community meetings and stakeholder input.

The field renovations include:

- **Replacing grass fields with synthetic turf.** Turf can dramatically increase playtime and reduce costs, since it eliminates the need to close fields due to rain or re-growth, allowing for year-round play. Turf can also provide a more consistent and level playing surface than grass, especially in busy urban parks.
- **Adding lighting for night play and other family-friendly park facilities,** such as fences, soccer nets, bleachers, walkways and bathrooms.
- **Adding new fields to existing parks** through new field configurations and updated designs.
- **Transforming the field reservation system.** The new reservation system (available on-line at <http://sf-recpark.org/>) allows people to electronically request fields with a 12-week cycle of advanced bookings. By increasing transparency and making field allocations more equitable for a broader range of users, the city has also significantly increased rental revenues, with many

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The mission of this project is incredibly important—to add play time to our sports fields and keep families living in San Francisco. We could not have done it without the City Fields partnership.

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**Phil Ginsburg, General
Manager, San Francisco
Recreation and Parks
Department**

more fields being reserved. These changes enable far greater use of San Francisco's athletic fields and promote equal access among all user groups.

Through these field renovations, construction projects and permit system changes, City Fields has added 66,000 hours of playtime to San Francisco's fields, greatly reducing the city's athletic field deficit and putting the city on course to meet existing youth ground sports demand by 2013. This is an extraordinary outcome in an era of shrinking city budgets and reduced services.

As shown below, the initiative did hit some bumps in the road, including concerns raised by some residents over the health and safety of synthetic turf. When park neighbors raised these concerns, City Fields and Recreation and Parks staff paused their work to fully understand and address the issues. The Recreation and Parks Department created a citywide Synthetic Playfields Task Force in 2008, and, with City Fields' assistance, implemented all of the Task Force's recommendation in the subsequent field renovations (see details in "Challenges" section below.)

Garfield Square Renovation, 2006

Located in the heart of the Mission District, Garfield Square is a community-gathering place with a playground, recreation center, indoor swimming pool, volleyball court and soccer field. In a neighborhood with a large Latino population, residents also use the park for the annual Day of the Dead and other community events. Despite its popularity, before the renovation the field was known as "el parque donde te rompes el pie," or "the park where you break your foot", since most of the year the field was a dry, rutted, and mostly dirt lot.

Working with the Recreation and Parks Department, City Fields added a new synthetic turf field, with permanent soccer goals and lights for evening play, giving Garfield Square's neighbors a safe place to play year-round, regardless of weather. Without needing to close the field for rain, grass re-growth or darkness, the new field nearly doubles the time for soccer play at Garfield Square, bringing over 1,600 additional hours of play to the Mission's kids and athletes. Bordered by new picnic areas, large trees and landscaping, the new field is a point of pride for the neighborhood, helping to make Garfield Square a popular

Before the renovation the field was known as "el parque donde te rompes el pie," or "the park where you break your foot"



Garfield Square field, before and after renovations



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Silver Terrace after renovations

community gathering spot for neighborhood families and athletes.

Silver Terrace Renovation, 2006

The second park with a renovated field, Silver Terrace Playground is a large, multi-sport park nestled between Highway 101 and Bayview Hill. The sports field was so rough, weedy and uneven that despite the chronic shortage of playfields for San Francisco's sports teams, Silver Terrace was "a field of last resort", according to city staff.

Working with the Recreation and Parks Department, City Fields brought new life to Silver Terrace with a synthetic turf field

for baseball/softball and a full-sized, multi-use/soccer field. Silver Terrace also received lights for night play, landscaping, benches and walkways. Once nearly abandoned, Silver Terrace is now one of the most requested soccer fields in the city, going from zero requests for its fields in 2005 to 82 requests in 2010.

Crocker Amazon Renovation, 2007/2008

Located near the southern border of the city, Crocker Amazon Playground is in the heart of an ethnically diverse neighborhood—including large Latino and Filipino communities—with more kids

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It's probably the best thing that's happened in the neighborhood in years.

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**Linda D'Avirro, President,
Crocker Amazon Park
Advisory Committee**



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*Crocker Amazon field, before and
after renovations*

“

My sons play baseball on the new South Sunset field and it is fabulous!!

It means a lot to me that the playing fields, swimming pools and play structures around the city are finally getting renovated.

”

Shellin Young, Parent

and families than any other district of San Francisco. More than 4,000 kids (ages 10–17) live within a one-mile radius of this park.

Because of its large size, the fields at Crocker Amazon serve as a sports field hub for youth teams citywide. But Crocker Amazon’s sports fields simply couldn’t stay open year round—poor drainage and wear-and-tear from overuse forced the city to close the fields for rest and grass re-growth for six months each year. As part of the 2007/2008 renovation, City Fields and the Recreation and Parks Department replaced the three existing grass fields with five full-size synthetic turf fields lined for soccer (and one also lined for lacrosse), and added new bleachers, bathrooms, a concession stand, a staff maintenance shed, and energy efficient, automated lights for night play. The Crocker Amazon renovations gave field users an impressive 12,358 additional hours of play each year, with fields now open for play 323% more time than before the renovation. The Crocker Amazon Park Advisory Committee has also been re-energized and is organizing clean-up days and park stewardship efforts with neighbors and community groups.

Franklin Square Renovation, 2008

Franklin Square is a four-acre park, situated near the convergence of the Mission, Potrero Hill and SOMA neighborhoods. Before the renovation, Franklin Square had a popular synthetic turf soccer field, picnic area and playground, but the field closed at dusk, limiting the time available for play. In 2008, the Recreation and Parks Department and City Fields added night lights, enabling the field to stay open for evening play. By adding new lights, the neighborhood’s soccer-loving residents now enjoy an additional 1,285 hours of playtime each year.

South Sunset Renovation, 2008

South Sunset Playground is one of the most popular athletic fields on the west side of San Francisco. Its youth baseball diamonds, soccer fields, basketball, volleyball and tennis courts, and playground are heavily used, and its recreation center features elderly and youth programs. Previously, the baseball diamonds and soccer fields had to be closed routinely after rains, and the field had numerous gopher tunnels, posing a constant hazard to players



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South Sunset field, before and after renovations



CITY FIELDS FOUNDATION



CITY FIELDS FOUNDATION

Kimbell Playground, before and after renovations



CITY FIELDS FOUNDATION

In 2008, the Playfields Initiative renovated South Sunset with synthetic turf and lights for evening play. The field is now configured for two baseball diamonds or three soccer fields, providing over 3,200 additional hours of baseball and softball games per year, and over 6,800 hours of additional ground sports play. The vibrancy of the new fields—with more players and longer hours of play—is unmistakable in the neighborhood and nearby schools.

Kimbell Renovation, 2010

Kimbell Playground is located in the Western Addition, one of the most ethnically and economically diverse areas of San Francisco. This is an active park with an extremely busy athletic field used for football, baseball, softball, and soccer. Kimbell's heavy use led to regular field closures—the fields were closed 25% of the winter and 10% of the spring due to rain alone. When open, the Kimbell field was often in poor condition.

The Foundation and the city completed the field renovation in Spring 2010, with new synthetic turf, a scoreboard, a staff maintenance shed, lighting, fences and *the first-ever batting cage in a San Francisco public park*. The renovated fields will bring an

additional 4,000+ hours of ground sports each year to the park. The field is also permanently lined for a variety of sports, so that soccer, football and lacrosse teams can play the same day, right after one another. The field was inaugurated in June 2010 with more than 150 neighborhood kids enjoying San Francisco's newest synthetic turf ball field.

Mission Playground Renovation, 2011

In City Fields' most recent project, planning and design is underway to restore Mission Playground, replacing the asphalt soccer field used for nightly pick-up games with a synthetic turf field and adding automated lights for evening play. City Fields is funding the athletic field renovation—the *first time asphalt will be replaced by turf in a San Francisco park*—while San Francisco's 2008 parks bond will pay to renovate the playground, clubhouse and other park facilities. In mid 2009, the city and the Foundation hosted three successful community meetings to present the conceptual design, discuss goals of the renovation project, and get feedback from park users. The design phase will conclude in late 2010, with construction expected in 2011.

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Kimbell field is an ideal site for synthetic turf. It's a high use, multi-sport facility with an adjacent playground and grassy area for picnics, festivals and casual play.

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**Lorraine Woodruff-Long,
San Francisco Police
Activities League**

Beach Chalet Soccer Fields Proposed Renovations

Located in the western end of Golden Gate Park near the ocean, the Beach Chalet Soccer Fields is one of the largest public athletic facilities in San Francisco, with four soccer fields used by over 1,500 kids and 600 adults each week in the fall. The planned renovation for Beach Chalet is an essential part of City Fields' efforts to close the gap in San Francisco's athletic fields, due to its large size, regular closure for grass re-growth, and location at the western edge of the city where few athletic facilities exist.

The Beach Chalet fields are in poor condition due to intense use and year-round wet conditions, with insufficient basic amenities, such as functioning restrooms, diaper changing stations, picnic areas, safe parking and seating. To address these problems, City Fields spent more than a year working with the community on renovation plans and invested significant resources in the design of the new fields and supporting facilities. The proposed \$12.5 million upgrade (with \$5 million from City Fields Foundation) includes turf fields, lighting, spectator seating, restrooms, walkways and more. The project would add more than 9,000 hours of new play each year, *eliminating the current athletic field deficit for youth ground sports in San Francisco.*

In April 2010, the Recreation and Park Commission voted unanimously to approve the Beach Chalet renovation but later that month, the Recreation and Parks Department and City Fields temporarily halted the project and requested an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) due to community concerns about the appropriateness of synthetic turf in Golden Gate Park and the impact of night lighting on migratory birds.

This outcome was very discouraging for City Fields' donors and supporters. The environmental review is expected to take 18 to 24 months, delaying the renovation, increasing costs and possibly putting other field projects at risk. Despite months of careful preparation and City Fields' willingness to invest \$5 million to improve Beach Chalet's athletic fields, a small but vocal group opposed to turf and lighting essentially put the project on hold. While this proposed renovation generated more attention and controversy than earlier projects, City Fields expects that an EIR may ultimately improve the final project and will help to address lingering environmental concerns.

School Fields

Looking beyond field renovations, in 2009 City Fields facilitated a pilot program between the Recreation and Parks Department and the San Francisco Unified School District to use sports fields at public schools to further reduce the city's athletic field deficit. This started with a successful pilot in Fall 2009, when three schools (Lowell, O'Connell and Mission high schools) allowed the city to reserve their fields during non-school hours for use by soccer leagues and others. The 2009 effort was a big success, with nearly 500 hours of additional sports time at the three fields and nearly \$20,000 in revenue for the school district from field rentals. In Fall 2010, the program is expanding to six schools, providing even more fields for San Francisco youth and adults. This pilot is an example of City Fields' innovative solutions to address the athletic field gap in San Francisco.

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I was surprised at how much people care about their parks, how much politics weighed in on this, and how divisive it became.

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City Fields donor

Accomplishments, Outcomes and Success Factors

Through these actions and the strong partnership with San Francisco's city government, City Fields has realized many accomplishments and generated significant outcomes since it began in 2005.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Accomplishment #1: Reduced San Francisco's Athletic Field Gap and Increased Play Time for Kids and Adults

As detailed above, by renovating and redesigning worn-out ball fields, adding lights for night play and helping the city to reorganize field permits and reservations, City Fields has dramatically increased athletic play space in the city and nearly eliminated the field deficit for San Francisco kids. Table 1 details how the field renovations added more than 31,000 hours of ground sports playtime to the city's athletic fields each year. Along with the additional hours from the reorganized field permits system (35,000 hours, see page 10), the Playfields

Initiative has added 66,000 hours of playtime to San Francisco's fields. *As a result, the city is now only four fields away from meeting the demand for ground sports playtime during the critical after school hours.*

This led to the following outcomes:

- **Youth soccer is growing in San Francisco, both in traditional leagues and with newer teams.** San Francisco Vikings Soccer Club—the city's largest youth soccer league—grew from 17 teams in 2009 to 25 teams in the 2010–11 season, while newer athletic groups are also growing, such as Bay Area Scores, a youth soccer and literacy program. As shown in Table 2 (see page 10), the number of youth soccer teams in San Francisco has more than doubled since 1995, including a significant increase since 2005 that Recreation and Parks Department staff attribute to the Playfields Initiative.
- **Improved fields increase overall park use:** As one Recreation and Parks



Children gather at South Sunset field

Table 1: Annual Increase in Hours of Play at Renovated Parks

	Increased Hours Without Closures	Increased Hours Without Rain-Outs	Increased Hours With Lights	Increased Hours From New Fields	Total Increase In Hours Of Play
Crocker Amazon	4,109	1,089	0	7,160	12,358
South Sunset	330	366	2,569	3,580	6,845
Kimbell	227	336	0	3,580	4,194
Franklin Square	0	0	1,285	0	1,285
Garfield Square	165	183	1,285	0	1,633
Silver Terrace	165	183	1,285	3,580	5,213
Combined Increase from Playfields Initiative Field Renovations	4,996	2,157	7,153	17,900	31,528

Source: Recreation and Parks Department.

Table 2: Increase In Youth Soccer Teams on San Francisco Fields, 1995–2010

Year	Total Teams*
1995	310
1999	396
2004	554
2010	702
% Increase (1995–2010)	126%

Source: Recreation and Parks Department for fall leagues

* Estimates from Viking, travel, micro, Scores and CYO leagues.

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Our goal was to renovate the athletic fields for formal athletic play but we discovered that the renovated fields were actually used by a diverse group of park visitors like the elderly doing Tai Chi and people using the fields for their morning walks. This was a surprise and a great outcome.

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Dan Mauer,
Recreation and Parks
Department

Department employee noted, with dramatically improved fields, the surrounding parks have now become destination facilities that bring a great diversity of park users, more neighborhood presence, and more safety. This is visible for example in Garfield Square Park, which was formerly considered a “nuisance facility” with crime, debris, and trash. Renovating the park led to higher public use and residual benefits that are evident in the park today. As shown in Table 3, after each field was renovated, requests for field permits increased tremendously (866% in the case of South Sunset park), indicating that the updated fields—and the parks around them—receive much higher use.

- **Renovated fields are more popular and reserved more often than other San Francisco ball fields.** As shown by

the number of field reservation requests, once the fields are renovated, they become among the most requested spaces for sports. In 2007, three of the top five most requested city athletic fields in San Francisco⁵ were fields renovated through the Playfields Initiative (Silver Terrace, Franklin Square and Garfield Square), and as shown in Table 4 (see page 11), the renovated turf fields are requested more often than grass fields by schools and youth leagues. Data collected by the Recreation and Parks Department also shows that residents from neighborhoods with high field demand or low field supply are travelling to other neighborhoods to play on synthetic turf because those sites are now available more often.

Accomplishment #2: Transformed San Francisco’s Field Permit and Reservation System

As a key part of the MOU and the partnership, the changes to the Recreation and Parks Department’s field reservation system have significantly increased the hours of organized play on city athletic fields—*adding an additional 35,000 hours of playtime to San Francisco fields each year.* This happened through more efficient field allocation and the Department’s ability to place more teams and players on each field. The revised system also ensures more equitable and transparent access to playfields for San Francisco residents, since the computerized

Table 3: Increase in Field Requests After Renovations

	# Of Requests Before Renovation	# Of Requests 2010
South Sunset	6 (in 2007)	58
Silver Terrace	0 (in 2005)	82
Crocker Amazon	N/A	63
Garfield Square	Rarely requested	25
Franklin Square	N/A	72

Source: Recreation and Parks Department; data not yet available for Kimbell.

⁵ As seen by the number of field requests moved to other locations.

Table 4: Percent of Reservation Requests for Synthetic Turf vs. Grass Fields, 2010*

	Requests For Synthetic Turf Fields	Requests For Grass Fields
For school games	84%	16%
For youth teams (ages 12 & up)	80%**	20%
For younger teams (ages 11 & under)	36%***	64%

Source: Recreation and Parks Department for San Francisco fields

** 80% for top two choices of fields

*** Younger teams tend to pick fields mostly by location and convenience.

system tracks users' addresses, giving higher priority to players that live in the city and to non-profit leagues serving low-income communities. As a result, more San Franciscans now enjoy better athletic fields for practices and games.

Outcome: The key outcome from these changes is a more efficient allocation of field space and user-friendly permit system, which in turn facilitates a significant increase in field use and hours of playtime. Prior to this project, the city had the capacity to upgrade the permit system but did not implement changes due to other priorities. Thus, the Playfields Initiative motivated the Recreation and Parks Department to take a more consumer-oriented approach, with more sensible field allocations and a more accessible and transparent reservation and permit system.

Accomplishment #3: Effective Public-Private Partnership With San Francisco

Another significant accomplishment of this initiative is the successful working relationship between City Fields and the Recreation and Parks Department. This partnership includes both significant financial contributions from both parties to renovate the fields, *and* committed staff working through numerous day-to-day details to ensure the renovations are done right. This involved working with turf companies to purchase turf that meets San Francisco's health and environmental standards, collaborating with architects

and contractors to design and build the fields, creating park signs with open-play hours and engaging park users and other stakeholders.

As one of the largest private donations to San Francisco's Recreation and Parks Department, this project shows that public-private partnerships can help cities facing large budget deficits to creatively fund public programs and address ongoing challenges. In 2010, for example, San Francisco faces an historic \$483 million deficit, laying off city staff, paring back transit service, and raising city fees to close the budget gap. But according to city staff, San Francisco is now more open to public-private partnerships as a result of the successful work with City Fields. This was a big learning curve for both the Foundation and for Recreation and Parks, but after six years, both parties see significant benefits from the partnership.

Accomplishment #4: Organized Families, Neighbors and Athletes in Support of Field Renovations and Park Stewardship

City Fields and San Francisco city staff worked hard to engage community members throughout the past six years—from listening to neighbors' input on field design and concerns about turf at community meetings, to organizing parents, kids and athletes to attend City Hall hearings, and supporting "Friends of Parks" groups at each of the renovated fields. Through these efforts, *City Fields helped to bring residents together in favor of field renovations*, by

“

Our goal was to change the permits so it would be fairer for users, more streamlined, and no longer an insider game. Transparency is key. This happened thanks to the partnership with City Fields—overall, field users view the new system as a tremendous improvement.

”

Dana Ketcham, Permits and Reservations Manager, San Francisco Recreation and Parks

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San Francisco’s popular sports fields are victims of their success, often pitted with gopher holes that can twist an ankle, dotted with sparse grass and unusable in wet weather. But a new approach that mixes private donations and city funds is making a difference: synthetic turf that gives thousands of kids and adults more playing time... A creative use of public and private money in tough budget times should be encouraged.

”

San Francisco Chronicle
Editorial, January 11, 2010

organizing more than 2,500 busy families and athletes who regularly use the parks but often do not come to meetings or get involved in city debates.

City Fields also tried to engage project supporters after each renovation was complete and the field reopened. Working with San Francisco Neighborhood Parks Council, City Fields engaged neighbors for volunteer programs and park stewardship at all six parks to help care for and maintain the revitalized fields. There are now “Friends of” groups at several of the renovated fields hosting park cleanups, neighborhood meetings, and community-building events. For example, Crocker Amazon Park Advisory Committee has partnered with Bay Area Scores (a youth soccer and literacy program) to host clean-up days, while the newly formed Friends of Kimbell Park is working with the Police Activities League football team and the Jewish Community Center on park stewardship. These and other park groups have been critical to reviving the parks and engaging community members.

WHAT DROVE SUCCESS?

Numerous aspects of the initiative led to these successful outcomes:

- **“Engaged philanthropy”:** Rather than writing a check and watching the project from a distance, City Fields’ trustees chose a high level of engagement, and staff acted on hundreds of day-to-day details to make each project

a success. As one Recreation and Parks Department employee noted, “The trustees showed great steadfastness and commitment to ‘stick with it,’ even though they didn’t have to spend their time, money, or energy on this effort.” As the project progressed, the trustees found that their commitment grew as well—they did not begin by thinking they would work so closely with the city but their knowledge and involvement grew as the project evolved. By being deeply involved in the details of each field renovation, staff was also able to take a thoughtful, politically savvy approach, a critical tool in San Francisco’s highly politicized environment.

- **Clear, achievable goals and consistent message:** Rather than taking on a large, intractable problem, City Fields picked a goal that was achievable—eliminate the deficit of athletic fields for San Francisco kids—in a relatively short timeframe. In addition, City Fields never waived from its central message of helping kids. In this way, improving athletic fields was an effective goal since the results are tangible—kids and parents enjoying the fields—with a visible, positive impact on the community. The success of this initiative was also measurable through increased playtime hours, number of fields renovated, and other metrics.
- **Strong relationship with Recreation and Parks Department staff:** In addition to the hard work of City Fields’ staff and trustees, the project benefitted from the close working relationship with city staff committed to making positive change in the parks. The partnership elevated the priority of athletic fields within the Department, giving these staff members the resources, outside assistance, and motivation they needed to focus on field renovations and improve the reservation system
- **Strong team and good communication:** Although City Fields is a small



CITY FIELDS FOUNDATION

Garfield Square community event



A young athlete on Kimbell field

organization, it was effective in bringing many parties together to improve the city's fields. This required hard work, patience, facilitation, and the ability to listen to opponents' concerns with an open mind. City Fields is committed to open and direct communication with concerned residents, which helped address neighborhood issues and bolstered City Fields' reputation as a responsible civic organization. Project staff and donors also work hard to maintain credibility in the city and

stay "in real time" with community concerns about the fields.

Many others also played a critical role—from city staff who invested significant time working closely with private partners, to Mayor Newsom who made strong financial and policy commitments, to multiple Recreation and Parks General Managers who endorsed the effort enthusiastically, and parents and league organizers who voiced their support at public meetings.

Bringing many parties together to improve the city's fields required hard work, patience, facilitation, and the ability to listen to opponents' concerns with an open mind.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

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There haven't been a lot of public private partnerships because they're a 'tough row to hoe'. But when they are effectively managed, these partnerships can be a viable model for others to follow. This is some of the most challenging work you can take on... but City Fields fought a good fight, stuck with it through the challenges.

”

Lauren Dachs,
S. D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation

Despite these accomplishments, the partnership faced many challenges during the past six years, slowing the project's progress and frustrating many stakeholders. But every obstacle also offered a lesson for similar philanthropic endeavors.

CHALLENGES

Challenge #1: San Francisco Politics Can Be Tough

As anyone who has worked in San Francisco knows, the city can be a very difficult place for philanthropy. This is due to several factors, including a powerful Board of Supervisors, multiple city commissions yielding significant influence over city projects, and famously liberal residents who can be resistant to change, especially in their neighborhoods and local parks. City Fields experienced this “tug of power” and heated local debate since each park renovation needed approval by the Recreation and Park Commission and in some cases—such as Beach Chalet—the Board of Supervisors could “weigh in” as well.

Many residents enthusiastically supported the field improvements but some critics were concerned about replacing grass with synthetic turf (see discussion below) and were vocal in their opposition, sometimes getting the attention of the Board of Supervisors. In this way, small groups of critics can dominate the public dialogue and stop projects that would benefit the city as a whole. City Fields experienced this multiple times, including resistance to field renovations in three parks (Rossi, Potrero Hill and Louis Sutter) where the Recreation and Parks Department and the Foundation ultimately decided not to renovate

the fields. This was disappointing to City Fields' supporters since these neighborhoods lack safe, high quality athletic fields, and frustrating for donors who wanted to invest in improving the parks. As a result, the Playfields Initiative had to navigate the politics, while still keeping their “eyes on the prize” of reducing the athletic playfield deficit.

Challenge #2: Addressing Concerns About Turf

As seen in the Beach Chalet controversy, one issue that opponents raised was concern over the safety and environmental impact of synthetic turf. This included fear about heavy metals and particulate matter emitted from the turf, recycling of the turf after its 10 to 15 year lifetime, and to some critics, opposition to replacing natural grass with an inorganic material. City Fields worked hard to listen to and learn more about these concerns regardless of their source or validity.

To address these concerns, the Recreation and Parks Department—with City Fields' assistance—formed the Synthetic Playfields Task Force in 2008, which vetted the issues and recommended purchasing turf that does not contain lead, purchasing from companies that use recycled content and other actions. As a result, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to mandate an end-of-life recycling program for synthetic turf, and has the most stringent purchasing standards for turf anywhere in the United States. Following these recommendations, City Fields worked with city officials to interview dozens of turf manufacturers to ensure that renovations after 2008 met these tough turf standards

One concern raised by community advocates was that although some neighbors had concerns about synthetic turf, they would have been more amenable to grass turf fields. But the Playfields Initiative did not promote grass turf since grass cannot survive the number of players or the amount of playtime needed to accommodate San Francisco youth leagues and schools (see box).

Some community members believe that if City Fields was more open to grass turf, it would have encountered fewer opponents. As Meredith Thomas, Neighborhood Parks Council explained, “City Fields was “pro-turf” but that didn’t work for everyone. Turf is controversial—some people have a gut reaction against it, others cite environmental concerns, while others love it without question—so you have to be prepared that not everyone wants it. But where neighbors did want turf, it worked great.”

Challenge #3: Working with City Government, Long-term Park Maintenance

Despite the close partnership with the Recreation and Parks Department, City Fields did experience challenges working with the city government. This included leadership changes (there have been four General Managers at Recreation and Parks since 2005), a public input process that can be slow and frustrating, and a political process that can elevate concerns of very small groups of residents. It can also be challenging to work in San Francisco on “family issues” (such as parks and athletic fields) since the city budget is extremely tight, and other ideological issues can get more attention than the immediate concerns of thousands of San Francisco families.

A related challenge is the long-term maintenance of each of the renovated parks, including replacing the turf after 10 to 15 years, fixing ancillary facilities as they wear down (including restroom, fences, lighting) and general park upkeep. While the fields receive a lot of attention during and after renovations because of funding and prominence, there is little money in

Advantages of Synthetic Turf Vs. Grass

MORE PLAYTIME: Synthetic turf allows more playtime on each field, since fields are not closed for rain, and require no “down time” for grass re-growth, mowing or maintenance.

GREAT FOR PLAY: Synthetic turf is level, free of gopher holes and drains quickly.

LESS MAINTENANCE: Maintenance costs can be 75% lower due to less upkeep and less water use (up to 1,000,000 gallons of water saved each year per park).

ENVIRONMENTAL ADVANTAGES: Synthetic turf does not need herbicides, fertilizers or pesticides.

Source: City Fields

San Francisco’s budget for park maintenance and the partnership does not include funding for long-term repairs and upkeep.

Challenge #4: Engaging Park Groups for Park Stewardship

City Fields provided grants to the San Francisco Neighborhood Parks Council to create and strengthen local park groups. This was quite successful in some neighborhoods—notably in communities surrounding Crocker Amazon and Kimbell parks—since these areas have savvy, well organized neighbors, dilapidated parks in need of improvement and a history of strong community involvement. But in other communities such as areas near Garfield Square, Silver Terrace, and Franklin Square, organizing residents for park stewardship is more challenging. Since crime and safety are the top concerns in these neighborhoods, residents are not focused on park upkeep, and once fields are renovated and are no longer a nuisance, community groups tend to focus on more pressing issues.

Another barrier to establishing park groups is that once fields are renovated, many users come from other neighborhoods, presenting parking and overuse problems. This is especially true in the most heavily used parks such as Crocker Amazon and South Sunset and can be off-putting for some neighbors. To make sure that park neighbors can enjoy the new fields, City Fields and Recreation and Parks encourage open use at scheduled times by developing and installing signs about “open play” hours. Still, the main users of the renovated fields end up being youth and adult athletes. This indicates that despite significant success and widespread support for the field renovations, San Franciscans have differing visions for their parks and some did not support the renovations.

LESSONS LEARNED

In the context of these challenges and accomplishments, there are many lessons to be learned from this initiative. These are particularly relevant for donors who might be interested in investing in public-private partnerships and others interested in projects that can benefit their local cities.

Lesson #1: Donors Can Have a Significant Impact on San Francisco Parks and Kids

Despite the challenges, the partnership between City Fields and San Francisco produced significant results with tangible benefits for city residents—six parks with 12 improved athletic fields, private donors working closely with the city government to improve public facilities, and thousands of hours of new playtime for city kids and athletes. The initiative shows what committed donors, staff and other stakeholders can accomplish when they work together with resolve, good planning, effective communication and a dedication to “stick with it” through the challenges. In this project, parks are a particularly good focus since the field improvements are very visible—in a short visit to Crocker Amazon or Garfield

Square or Kimbell, you can see the results with hundreds of kids playing.

Lesson #2: Private Partnerships With Public Agencies Can Be Very Successful

In spite of the challenges that City Fields faced working with San Francisco government, this initiative shows that private foundations can work successfully with public agencies to benefit tens of thousands of city residents. This succeeded partly because private funding brought resources and visibility to the project, but also because many stakeholders worked together diligently and were truly invested in making a difference for San Francisco youth. In the case of City Fields, more than 70 donors came together to support a clearly defined need and solution. This effort can pave the way for other donors and supporters, who might be reluctant to work with public agencies but can see that success is possible.

Lesson #3: Controversial Issues Require “Thick Skin”

This initiative picked a controversial issue—replacing grass with synthetic turf—that garnered some vocal opposition since not all neighbors embraced the benefits of synthetic turf over grass fields. As one observer noted, “City Fields chose a tough issue and controversial project, that ultimately benefited the whole city, but supporters shouldn’t be surprised when it attracted vocal opponents.” Some neighbors didn’t want what City Fields had to offer, despite the project having the best intentions, and some residents questioned the motive of City Fields’ donors, suggesting they might benefit financially from the project.

Although the trustees, staff and other donors had no agenda—other than improving athletic fields and increasing playtime for San Francisco kids—they experienced some distrust and vocal opposition. This meant that donors and staff had to be realistic and flexible about their expectations and needed

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What the City Fields Foundation has done is they’ve taken fields that were unusable and that coaches and players didn’t want to play on and have increased the capacity of the fields space so we can have good quality games on a good level surface that’s a safe playing surface for the kids.”

”

Shelli Meneghetti,
Vikings Youth Soccer League

fairly “thick skin” when some city residents actively opposed improving facilities in their local park. In the end, the project has achieved many positive outcomes, but not everyone embraced it and that’s the reality of charitable donations in a large, political city like San Francisco.

***Lesson #4: “Engaged” Family
Philanthropy Was Gratifying For Donors***

This project has been very satisfying to City Fields’ donors, including trustees Bob, Bill and John Fisher, precisely because it was challenging and required hard work and commitment. All three trustees share the opinion that this type of “engaged” philanthropy — requiring regular involvement and attention — was

much more satisfying than simply giving a donation or writing a check. Their personal involvement made a big difference both in terms of the initiative’s success and their own satisfaction with the effort.

In addition, City Fields’ trustees were enthusiastic about working together on a joint project — the brothers had collaborated on other business projects but never on a charitable initiative and this was interesting and satisfying for them. As Susan Hirsch, City Fields Director noted, “Part of the magic of this effort is the strong family ties between the trustees. They were highly motivated to work together on something they cared about and make it a success. They worked hard and understood there were compromises along the way.”

“

It’s been a real pleasure to work with my brothers and the terrific team [at City Fields]... We had a great time working together. These things aren’t easy but if you work hard and with passion, listen to your critics, and have good people on your team, you can be incredibly successful. I’m blown away by what City Fields has created.”

”

**John Fisher,
City Fields Trustee**

Conclusions

In just six years, the Playfields Initiative has completed several carefully planned and executed projects with real benefits for city residents. Through renovation projects at 12 athletic fields in six parks, replacing grass fields with synthetic turf, and

permit system improvements, this partnership has added 66,000 hours of playtime to the city's fields, greatly reducing the city's athletic field deficit. *This is an extraordinary increase that directly benefits thousands of San Francisco's youth.*

In light of the initiative's many accomplishments, as well as the multiple challenges it faced and potential lessons learned, the message for donors and others interested in public partnerships is clear:

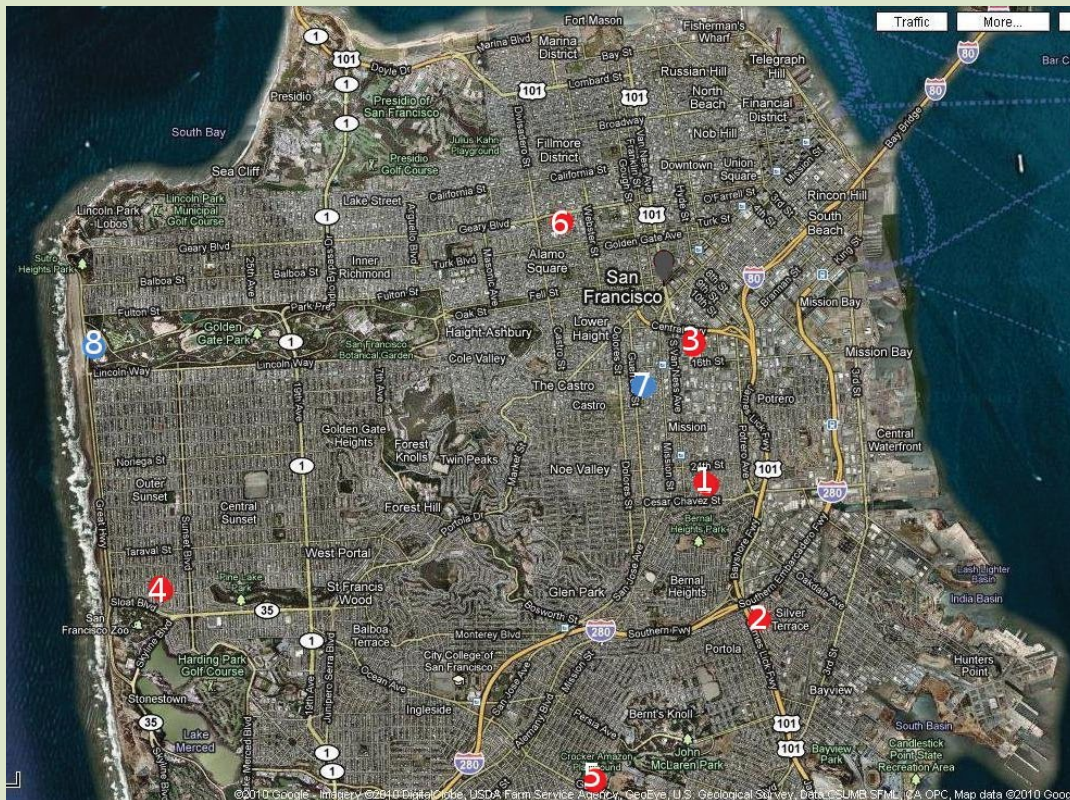
- Work hard: these efforts require significant commitment and involvement;
- Do what you love and have passion for;
- Stay focused on your goal but be flexible as you go along;
- Build a good team;
- It takes time to make change;
- Have fun and you will be successful!



CITY FIELDS FOUNDATION

Night play at Franklin Square

APPENDIX A: LOCATION OF RENOVATED FIELDS



MAP KEY

Renovated Fields

1. Garfield Square
2. Silver Terrace Playground
3. Franklin Square
4. South Sunset Playground
5. Crocker Amazon Playground
6. Kimbell Playground

Fields in Design and Planning Stage

7. Mission Playground
8. Beach Chalet Soccer Fields

Credit: © 2010 Google—Imagery, Map Data © 2010

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED FOR CITY FIELDS CASE STUDY

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| 1. Yomi Agunbiade, Past General Manager, San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (2004–2008) | 6. Phil Ginsburg, General Manager, San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (2009—present) | 10. Dan Mauer, Capital Improvement Division Program Manager, San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department |
| 2. Lauren Dachs, Executive Director, S. D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation | 7. Patrick Hannan, Communications, Planning and Program Director, City Fields Foundation | 11. Michael Sullivan, Commissioner, San Francisco Recreation and Park Commission |
| 3. John Fisher, Trustee, City Fields Foundation | 8. Susan Hirsch, President, Hirsch and Associates LLC | 12. Meredith Thomas, Executive Director, Neighborhood Parks Council |
| 4. Bob Fisher, Trustee, City Fields Foundation | 9. Dana Ketcham, Permits and Reservations Manager, San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department | |
| 5. Bill Fisher, Trustee, City Fields Foundation | | |



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